

Contextualizing Texts: Brief Remarks about the First Visigothic Symposium

Jacques Elfassi

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Response to Visigothic Symposium I, Panel 1: Theology

Contextualizing Texts: Brief Remarks about the First *Visigothic Symposium*

JACQUES ELFASSI
UNIVERSITY OF LORRAINE-METZ

I must start with a *captatio benevolentiae*: I have never written a ‘response’, and I do not really know what this academic ‘genre’ is. I suppose that what is expected from me is either a general review of all the contributions, which could show general convergences and divergences, or an answer to general questions such as those suggested by the editors in their general presentation of the volume (To what extent did theology influence law? How did law direct theology?...). I hope that I will be forgiven, but I do not feel up to either one or the other. Indeed, what would I say but banalities? Yes, of course, theology can influence law: the article of Capucine Nemo-Pekelman, for example, shows sufficiently how canon 57 of the Fourth Council of Toledo is underpinned by a theological reflection on liberty and grace. Conversely, it may be difficult to say that law can influence theology, but it is clear that a theological discourse is never disconnected from the time when it is produced. Admittedly, Christianity is a revealed religion, and therefore, for a Christian theologian, eternal truth has already been revealed; but the role of the theologians still remains, as far as possible, to adapt this truth to the world in which they live, and they are necessarily



influenced, even unconsciously, by their time and personal situation. For example, the article of Dolores Castro shows how Isidorian anthropology (man is a sinner but he was created in the image of God and is mutable, so he carries within him the possibility of conversion) is linked to the role of the Church in the Visigothic world and to the pastoral activity of the bishop (the Church is responsible for helping man in his conversion, which must take place in this world). So yes, of course, theology can influence law, and no, of course (again), theology is not disconnected from its time. In Visigothic Spain, this link between law and theology is reinforced, or at least made more evident, by the close relations which exist between the secular and ecclesiastical worlds, and which are clearly illustrated by the article of Isabel Velázquez. But these general considerations are hardly original; or rather, to be honest, I do not feel myself competent enough to deepen these questions in an original way. For this reason, I prefer to focus on a problem which is not central to this volume, but which has particularly interested me and on which I may arouse a debate: it is that of the contextualization of texts.

Let us take the example of two articles of this *Visigothic Symposium*: that of Michael J. Kelly and that of Capucine Nemo-Pekelman. Kelly argues that in order to understand the *Liber Iudiciorum*, we must situate it in its immediate context: in 653, under Recceswinth. In a certain way, Nemo-Pekelman's approach is the opposite: it shows that in order to understand an important canon of the Fourth Council of Toledo (633), we must distance ourselves from the immediate context and have in mind a theological reflection that goes back two centuries earlier, to the time of Augustine. Of course, this opposition must not be caricatured: Kelly is not unaware that the *Liber iudiciorum* is part of a longer history, and

Nemo-Pekelman is not unaware of the immediate context of the Fourth Council of Toledo, which must deal with the consequences of the forced conversion of the Jews decided by Sisebut towards 615. But there is, nevertheless, a significant difference of focus.

Everyone judges in relation to her or his own research and inclinations. Myself, I work mainly on Isidore of Seville, an author whose life is very poorly known. He died in 636, but his date of birth, and even the exact date of his accession to the episcopate are not known. It is certain that he played a major pastoral and political role, but actually this role is hardly known. Isidore's most often quoted work in this *Visigothic Symposium* is the *Sententiae*.¹ But the date of this work, as the date of most of Isidore's texts, is unknown. Pierre Cazier put forward the hypothesis that the *Sententiae* date from the time of the Fourth Council of Toledo, therefore ca. 633,² but this is only a hypothesis. Other specialists dated them rather of the time of Sisebut (ca. 614).³ Another hypothesis has had little success and indeed it is based on very fragile bases, but it may also be recalled that a historian – and not the least – suggested that the *Sententiae* might have been composed very early, soon after 595.⁴ In other words, the same work has been dated from the very beginning, from the middle or from the very end of Isidore's career: this prompts a certain caution when we

¹ See the articles of Dolores Castro, Jacques Elfassi and Capucine Nemo-Pekelman (*passim*), but also of Isabel Velázquez (p. 65) and Michael J. Kelly (p. 115). The central place of this work in this *Visigothic Symposium* is related to the theme of conversion, which is at the intersection of the two major issues, law and theology.

² See Pierre Cazier, "Les *Sentences* d'Isidore de Séville et le IV^e Concile de Tolède. Réflexions sur les rapports entre l'Église et le pouvoir politique en Espagne autour des années 630," in *Los Visigodos. Historia y Civilización. Actas de la Semana Internacional de Estudios Visigóticos (Madrid-Toledo-Alcalá de Henares, 21-25 octubre de 1985)* (Murcia, 1986 – Antigüedad y Cristianismo, III), 377-85; Id., *Isidorus Hispalensis Sententiae* (Turnhout 1998 – CCSL 111), XIV-XIX.

³ On the difficulty of dating the *Sententiae*, see Castro's article, p. 3 n. 3, or mine, p. 46 n. 10.

⁴ See Paul Meyvaert, "Uncovering a Lost Work of Gregory the Great: Fragments of the Early Commentary on Job," *Traditio* 50 (1995): 55-74, esp. p. 72 n. 40.

pretend to contextualize it. In any case, this does not prevent us from continuing to note similarities between the *Sententiae* and the Fourth Council of Toledo: indeed, we can assume that Isidorian thought has remained relatively coherent and therefore, even if the *Sententiae* date, for example, to the 610s, it is not absurd to compare them to a text of 633. Nemo-Pekelman⁵ points out that the Isidorian doctrine of grace brings the 4th Council of Toledo closer to the *Sententiae*, but also to the *Differentiae*, which are generally considered to be one of the first works of Isidore.⁶

Now let us talk about the *De fide catholica*. Apparently, if there is a work that is easy to contextualize, it is this: is it not directly related to Sisebut's policy of forced conversion of the Jews? Yet it must be remembered that the *De fide catholica* does not allude to Sisebut (not even in the preface), nor to forced baptisms, nor to the tendency of new converts to apostasy. It is therefore questionable whether the book is really linked to the anti-Jewish legislation of Sisebut and whether it is not prior to it.⁷ For my part, I even wonder whether the *De fide catholica* should not be completely dissociated from the context of forced baptisms:⁸ it is only a hypothesis but, after all, the link which is traditionally established between the *De fide catholica* and Sisebut's legislation is also hypothetical. Moreover, even if the *De fide catholica* is really contemporary with the anti-Jewish laws of Sisebut,

⁵ Nemo-Pekelman's article, p. 163.

⁶ Nevertheless, it must be recalled that this dating of the *Differentiae* is not certain either.

⁷ To my knowledge, the first to have written that the *De fide catholica* is probably anterior to the legislation of Sisebut is Raúl González Salinero, *Las conversiones forzosas de los judíos en el reino visigodo* (Roma, 2000), 121-22. I reached the same conclusion independently (I confess that I had not yet read González Salinero's book), in the review I wrote about the book of Wolfram Drews, *Juden und Judentum bei Isidor von Sevilla: Studien zum Traktat Fide catholica contra Iudaeos* (Berlin, 2001), in *Revue des Études Augustiniennes* 49 (2003): 219-20.

⁸ See Jacques Elfassi, "Les Psaumes dans le *De fide catholica contra Iudaeos* d'Isidore de Séville: analyse de quelques passages," in *Judaïsme et christianisme dans les commentaires patristiques des Psaumes*, ed. M.-A. Vannier (Bern, 2015 - Christianismes anciens, 3), 165-83, esp. pp. 168-70.

there remain many uncertainties. Did Isidore exchange letters with Sisebut about the policy to be applied to the Jews? Maybe so, maybe not; except by miraculous discovery, we will never know. Had he consecrated even one sermon to the Jews? Again, we will never know. In reality, we know very little about Isidore's point of view on Sisebut's anti-Jewish legislation. Nemo-Pekelman sums up the rare data we have in our possession (the Third Council of Seville, Isidore's *History of the Goths* and the Fourth Council of Toledo),⁹ but these data are limited and problematic: this is precisely the reason why Isidore's position has aroused so much debate among historians.

In recent years, I have tried to propose a new approach to the *De fide catholica*: rather than trying to situate it in the narrow context of the beginning of the seventh century (I am afraid that almost everything has been said on the matter), I wanted to situate it in the wider context of the patristic literature, especially the *Adversus Iudaeos* genre and the exegetical literature.¹⁰ I think I have obtained interesting results: for example, I discovered in the *De fide catholica* an extract from Novatian's *De Trinitate*, a treatise whose diffusion in Visigothic Spain was unknown until now.¹¹ And I hope to have rehabilitated this often-quoted but little-known and ill-loved work: Isidore shows great freedom in using the

⁹ See pp. 151-52.

¹⁰ See Jacques Elfassi, "Le livre d'Ézéchiel dans le *De fide catholica contra Iudaeos* d'Isidore de Séville," *Connaissance des Pères de l'Église* 133, march 2014, p. 35-45 ; Id., "Le livre d'Isaïe dans le *De fide catholica contra iudaeos* d'Isidore de Séville: analyse de quelques passages," in *Judaïsme et christianisme chez les Pères*, ed. M.-A. Vannier (Turnhout, 2015 - Judaïsme ancien et origines du christianisme, 8), 311-25 ; Id., "Les Psaumes dans le *De fide catholica contra Iudaeos* d'Isidore de Séville : analyse de quelques passages," in *Judaïsme et christianisme dans les commentaires patristiques des Psaumes*, ed. M.-A. Vannier (Bern, 2015 - Christianismes anciens, 3), 165-83. This approach is not entirely new: see Wolfram Drews, *The Unknown Neighbour. The Jew in the Thought of Isidore of Seville* (Leiden: Brill, 2006 - The Medieval Mediterranean, 59), 47-70 ("Sources") [= *Juden und Judentum bei Isidor von Sevilla. Studien zum Traktat De fide catholica contra Iudaeos* (Berlin, 2001 - Berliner Historische Studien, 34), 134-87 ("Quellen")], but his study of the sources remains very incomplete, because it was not his main purpose.

¹¹ See Elfassi, "Le livre d'Isaïe" (*art. cit.*), p. 316-317.

sources, and some passages are particularly successful. For example, the exegesis of Gn 24:2-3 is much more original in the *De fide catholica* (I.7) than in the *Expositio in Genesim*, where Isidore contented himself with faithfully copying his source.¹²

We must repeat: there is no contradiction between narrow and broad contextualization, there is only a difference of focus. However, I would like to emphasize this point: everybody agrees that it is anachronistic to study an author of the past while ignoring everything of the time when he or she lived, but it is no less anachronistic to study an author of Late Antiquity or the Early Middle Ages while ignoring her or his patristic anchorage. And in the case of an author like Isidore of Seville, it may well be that taking into account his patristic context is the best way to make the most discoveries.

¹² See Elfassi, “Les Psaumes dans le *De fide catholica contra Iudaeos*” (*art. cit.*), 174-75.